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Monday, May 25, 2009

Annual campaign touts importance of living wills

Terri Schiavo case underscored for many people why they need to make their wishes known about end-of-life issues

BY HIRAN RATNAYAKE • THE NEWS JOURNAL • APRIL 14, 2009

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No matter where you stand on the debate, at least one good thing came out of the Terri Schiavo case.

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More people than ever before took the initiative to fill out advance directives,

Drew Biehl, a social worker with Delaware Hospice, said the subject of a living will can be difficult for family members to talk about.
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The News Journal/JENNIFER CORBETT

IF YOU GO

The following National Healthcare Decisions Day events are taking place Thursday in Delaware:

Newark Senior Center

WHAT: Education table sponsored by Delaware End of Life Coalition

WHEN: 11a.m.-1 p.m.

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prompted by the case that focused on Michael Schiavo's legal fight to get his wife, Terri, in a persistent vegetative state, disconnected from her life-sustaining feeding tube.

Terri Schiavo's state resulted from sudden respiratory and cardiac arrest in 1990. She was disconnected on March 31, 2005, and died shortly thereafter. The case rarely makes the news anymore. But as a way to urge more people to fill out advance directives, [health care](#) workers last year recognized April 16 as National Healthcare Decisions Day. The annual effort, which takes place again this Thursday, aims to get patients to discuss and express their wishes in advance regarding health care and end-of-life issues.

Drew Biehl, a social worker with Delaware Hospice, said the subject of a family member's death can be difficult to broach.

"In an initial meeting with patients and their families, one of the things I'll ask is whether they have an advance directive," he said. "Many people will say that they don't want to talk about it now or they'll talk about it later. It's something they evade and then they never end up talking about it."

For an advance directive to be honored in Delaware, it must be in writing, signed, dated and completed in the presence of witnesses. Not only is filling out an advance directive form free, proponents say it can save [money](#) and eliminate infighting among family members.

The Pew Research Center has found that the number of people who say they have a living will rose to 29 percent in 2005, up from 12 percent in 1990.

Every adult should have an advance directive, said Thaddeus Pope, a bioethicist and associate law professor at Widener [University](#) School of Law. "Some people don't know about it, some people don't want to do it because they're afraid, and some people think it's only a one-way choice for refusing treatment," he said. "A lack of education is the problem, but that's why I think the National Healthcare Decisions Day is a good way to teach people why you should do it, how to do it and what you might want to record as your preferences."

ADDRESS: 200 White Chapel Drive, New ark

CONTACT: 737-2336

Christiana Care -- Stanton

WHAT: Education table sponsored by Delaware End of Life Coalition

WHEN: 4:30-7 p.m.

ADDRESS: 4755 Ogleton n-Stanton Road, New ark

CONTACT: 733-1000

JEWISH FAMILY SERVICES

WHAT: GEM program for 50 and older

WHEN: 10 a.m.-noon

ADDRESS: 99 Passmore Road, Wilmington

CONTACT: 478-9411, ext. 130.

DELAWARE HOSPICE CENTER

WHAT: Advance Directive Open House

WHEN: 10 a.m.-2 p.m.

ADDRESS: 100 Patriots Way, Milford

CONTACT: 856-7717

WIDENER UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF LAW

WHAT: National Healthcare Decisions Day Public Education Forum

WHEN: 7-8:30 p.m.

ADDRESS: Ruby R. Vale Moot Courtroom, 4601 Concord Pike, Wilmington

CONTACT: 477-2162

ON THE WEB

www.nationalhealthcaredecisionsday.org

www.delawaredecisions.org

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Pope said the need for advance directives has grown due to people living longer. As the elderly suffer illnesses such as dementia, that impair their mental abilities, they may be able to perform certain functions such as eating, but be incapable of making health care decisions. Before they get to that stage, they should discuss an advance directive with their doctors.

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"You want to talk to some person who is experienced on these types of things because they're going to be a good guide, a good sounding board," Pope said.

The advance directive should be evaluated periodically as a person goes through major life events. The directive you make as a young adult may no longer match your desires as you age, have children, switch [jobs](#), etc. Several people close to you should have copies of the advance directive.

On Monday, in preparation for National Healthcare Decisions Day, the Lewes Public Library hosted a series of talks on the issue. On Thursday, there will be events hosted by Widener University School of Law, the Delaware [Academy](#) of Medicine and Delaware Hospice.

"There's a subtlety to the National Healthcare Decisions Day concept," said Tim Gibbs, executive [director](#) of the Delaware Academy of Medicine. "It's one day, but it's also a 365-day-a-year initiative where we're putting together groups for people to start talking about it. You might not want to think about it or talk about it, but death is an inevitability and it's better to do it when you are in a good place than to not have anything in place."

Without an advance directive, doctors often perform painful heroic measures that they're not sure the patients would have ever wanted, said Dr. John Goodill, medical director of the pain management and palliative care at Christiana Care. If there is no advance directive in place, the doctors

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have no choice.

"When you don't have that information, you have to work with their family and what you think is in their best interest," he said. "The fall-back position is to provide any treatment we can to keep them alive, even if those treatments become increasingly burdensome and become increasingly nonbeneficial and sometimes even inadvertently worsen their suffering at the end."

There's an ongoing debate on whether the term "Do not resuscitate" should be changed to "Allow natural death" in order to aid families with their decisions. But Biehl said a common misconception about advance

directives is that people will be forced to fill out a form that instructs health care workers to remove life support or a feeding tube in the case of a coma. The directive is designed to honor whatever a person wants.

"Whatever they want to choose is fine," he said. "It's just important that they make the choices."

"This is something that sooner or later we will all deal with," Gibbs said. "And if you don't have an advance directive, you deal with the consequences of not having one."

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WHAT: National Healthcare Decisions Day Public Education Forum

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